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ABSTRACT

The development of computer courseware for Danish high school students of intermediate French is described. Five areas are addressed. First, the hardware and capabilities of the computer are noted. Second, the traditional methods of Danish second language instruction are outlined, focusing on the role of oral communication and written text in the classroom. Third, the nature of listening comprehension and its implications for classroom language instruction are discussed. The fourth area addressed is the relationship between listening comprehension and language acquisition, looking more closely at the notion that student recognition of knowledge gaps and the ability to find information to fill them is essential to language learning. Finally, the exercise itself is described. Its text consists of an interview with a young Algerian girl discussing aspects of female liberation. The users listen to the text, and can read the text on the screen while they listen. Questions relating to different topics in the text follow. Students may refer to the oral or written text if necessary, and may consult a computerized dictionary of the vocabulary used. The exercise is being pilot tested. (MSE)

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<u>On the pedagogical and technological development of a computer-assisted exercise in listening comprehension.</u>

This paper is a report on the elaboration of a computer aided exercise in listening comprehension. It is intended for Danish high school students who have learnt French for about two years, i.e. that they have had approximately 220 hours of teaching. The target language is French. The pedagocical work has been carried out in collaboration with a high school teacher, Anne Lindskov Hansen. The technology has been taken care of by one of the technicians of the department and a student who has done the programming.

In my talk, I shall treat five areas:

1) The technical aspects, what is new about the exercise in this respect

2) Some facts about the nature of spoken language and the Danish language teaching tradition

3) Some facts about the nature of listening comprehension and their implications for the practice of it

4) I shall mention a theory of the relationship between comprehension and learning

and end with

5) a description of the exercise

1)
First of all: the technical details - this will be very brief, as I am not myself a technician - what is new about this kind of computer-aided language learning? The novelty is that the computer has been upgraded so that it has become a socalled sampler, which is roughly a "computational recorder" (not a tape recorder, but a computational recorder), where the sound has been stored in digitalised form. This has been done by means of Audiocard 300, which is manufactured by Speech Design, Munich. As the manufacturer describes it it permits certain personal computers to speak with a tape recorder-like voice. It is a digital, intelligent soundtrack inside the personal computer, which permits spech to be recorded and reproduced under program control.

The sound that we use for our exercise is an interview that has been recorded on an ordinary tape-recorder, i.e. it is <u>not</u> synthetic speech. The quality of the sound that is reproduced can

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indeed be described as that of an average tape recorder.

2)
The objectives for French in Danish high schools include a certain command of spoken French. The regulations and guidelines for the teaching of French prescribed by the Ministry for Education gives the following directions. " To be able to comunicate with francophones students should be trained to understand spoken French at a reasonable speech rate without looking at a written text." Exactly what a reasonable speech rate is, is not further developed. It could mean reasonable from the learner's point of view or it could mean the average speech rate of speakers of French. It problably means what is reasonable after the number of hours in the curriculum.

As opposed to the situation in many other countries, Danish teachers are free to choose their own teaching methods as long as they attain the main objectives set up for the subject. This means that it is difficult to know exactly how much listening comprehension activity goes on in the classroom, but it is a fair guess supported by anecdotal evidence from teachers and students that generally speaking, it is seldom a seperate activity. Students are supposed to achieve oral comprehension of French by listening to the teacher. If seperate listening activities take place they consist of listening to tapes of a text which has already been studied, or watching a film the script of which has been read beforehand. E.g. Jean Paul Sartre's Les jeux sont faits is widely used in that way. Although films and actors'interpretation of plays and other literary genres can be good teaching material it is our opinion that it is not sufficient to teach students the kind of comprehension they will need if they are to communicate orally with French speaking persons. They should also practice comprehension of spontaneous, spoken language, so that they become familiar with the performance errors that all native speakers commit. I am referring to phenomena like

a) repetitions, e.g. Oui parce que les études que je fais - c'est pas c'est pas quelque chose de très commun en Algérie

b) slips and corrections, e.g. ou bien vous me laissez et j'irai quand même euh tranquillement sagement

c) unfinished sentences, e.g. j'ai une seule soeur qui est mariée - et j'ai cinq frères - dans la - deux mariés et les autres non

Although there is in Denmark within the field of second language teaching a long-lived tradition for practising oral communication in the classroom, the teaching nevertheless relies heavily on written texts. Practising oral communication at the intermediate and advanced levels usually consists of the teachers asking questions about the "lesson of the day", which is something like 2 pages of written text (a novel, a short story, a play). This importance of the written language also goes for vocabulary acquisition, where students usually acquire the written and the

spoken form of a word at the same time.

This means that it is a great help for students' comprehension to be able to look at a written text, which is just what the computer allows very easily. We made a small study of this with 5 students who had taken French for either 18 months or two and a half years. First, they listened to the oral text of the exercise, then to the oral and the written text. We asked them to describe the difficulties they had understanding the spoken text and how looking at the written text helped them comprehend. Genereally speaking, comprehension is hampered by the phenomena that I mentioned, such as unfinished sentences, slips and filled pauses. I quote one remark " We do not think that tape recordings of authentic situations (with reconstructions and normal French speech rate) are adequate for our level if there is no written text".

The lesson we draw from this is that Danish students of French are so used to relying on the written text, that a listening comprehension exercise must take this fact into consideration, and that is just what the computer - sampler is well suited to do. I am not saying that this is necessarily the ideal way of teaching students to understand spoken French, but my point of view is that we should make an exercise that fits into the teaching and learning traditions of the country.

3) A few words about the nature of listening comprehension. According to recent psycholinguistic literature language understanding is looked upon as an interactive process where information from all linguistic levels contribute; it is stressed that information from the upper levels is used more than information from the lower levels. If we look at the linguistic levels for spoken language, we get a list like this:

pragmatics
discourse
lexis
syntax
morphology
phonology
perception and segmentation of sound

What happens is that a central processor chooses information from the appropriate levels, i.e. that as soon as the sounds have been perceived and segmented, information is drawn from the upper levels. It is only when this information is insufficient or misleading that the processor uses information from the syntactic and morphological levels. This is the normal process as far as native speakers are concerned. As a matter of fact, all studies of oral comprehension deal with native speakers. I know only of one study on learners, that of Conrad (1985) who shows that as opposed to native speakers, learners tend to use syntactic information in their listening comprehension process - the less advanced, the more they use syntax.

The pedagogical implication of this is to try to encourage

students to use as much top-down processing as possible to persuade them that they need not grasp every little detail of the text in order to understand the message. This is indeed what authors of listening comprehension exercises generally recommand (e.g. Lynch 1983 and Ur 1984).

4)A few words about the relationship between comprehension and acquisition.
We have all heard about Krashen's input hypothesis; as you know he claims that students acquire a second language if they are exposed to input that is just a tiny little bit above what sthe learner can comprehend (what he calls i + 1). There is no need to go further into that. One might, however, speculate about the relationship between comprehension and learning. This has been done by Færch and Kasper (1986). They claim that it must be a condition for acquisition to take place that learners realize that there is a comprehension problem. Lack of comprehension may be caused by gaps in the input (e.g. noise) or gaps in the learners' knowledge. It is only in the latter case that it could lead to acquisition and then only if learners take responsibility for the gap. There may be gaps in the learners knowledge that they refuse to be bothered with - this holds for e.g. technical vocabulary and expressions that they would not know in their mother tongue. It is only if they consciously recognize the gap and take responsibility, and take steps to fill the gap by seeking the necessary information that acquisition can take place. According to Færch and Kasper this holds for the top levels like lexis, pragmatics and discourse.

If one follows Færch and Kasper's theory, the pedagogical implications must be to put students in situations where they recognize gaps in their knowledge as they do in our listening comprehension exercise and if they are in a position to find information to fill them. This is done in our exercise by giving them the possibility of resorting to the written text and also to an ad hoc dictionary, where they can look up unknown words. I'll say a little more about the dictionary in a moment, when I describe the exercise itself.

5) I now come to my fifth and last point, the description of the exercise.

It is a very important factor in comprehension that the listener knows what to expect, in other words that the listner is familiar with the situational and topical context. So we start the exercise by telling the user what contents to expect. As I have already said the text is an interview with a young Algerian girl who is studying to become an actor. She tells about her efforts to liberate herself from an oppressive upbringing, about her sister, who lives in a more traditional way. The interview also touches upon other aspects of female liberation. We assumed that this would be a text that could interest high school students, and so far our assumptions seem to be correct.

We then explain that understanding French seems to be more difficult than understanding English and German. We say that this

is probably due to phenomena like liaison, enchaînement and e caduc. Users are offered the possibility to read an explanation of these phenomena.

After that, the formerly mentioned speech performance phenomena (repetitions, slips etc) are introduced, and examples are given.

The exercise itself is divided into sections according to the topics of the interview. The users must listen to the text. After this first listening, they can repeat the sound text as many times as they like, and they now have the possibility to see the written text on the screen while they listen. They are also able to look up words. After each section the user has the choice between going on to the next section or answering control questions before going on. We feel that this freedom should be given, as some users might prefer to judge for themselves if their comprehension is sufficient. Others might want a kind of control; it is, however, difficult to control comprehension by asking questions, as these often pose new comprehension problems. We have tried to overcome this difficulty by restricting ourselves to questions that only concern the main trend of the interview and in the control questions we only use words that have already been used in the text. Another reason for asking questions that only concern the main trend of the interview is that, as I mentioned previously, we want to encourage learners to use top-down comprehension.

A few words about the dictionary.
All the words of the text, except very elementary ones like the prepositions à and de have been listed in the dictionary. Another exception is words that are the same in French and Danish, e.g. résultat (result). Words with regular inflection have been lemmatised. Words that change considerably with inflection are listed in the form in which they appear in the text. E.g. irai is listed like that with the translation will go. The user is offered the possibility to see the five main forms and the conjugation of the tenses used in spoken language. The reason for this is that in our experience students do not recognize the forms of the irregular verbes that are very different from the infinitive,which means that they are unable to look them up in an ordinary dictionary.

We are at present testing the exercise, letting high school students go through it, make observations and fill out a questionnaire. The ultimate goal is a series of listening comprehension exercises for this level, exercises that could be used by smaller groups of students while the teacher copes with the rest of the class.

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